

Prison reform will go down as one of the marquee achievements of Gov. Jerry Brown's second run leading California.

His policies thinned out the state's badly overcrowded prisons, redirected low-level offenders to rehabilitation and set budgets that provided inmates with more mental health and educational resources than ever. Unfortunately, another branch of California government paid a price for Brown's progress in state prisons.

California county jails now are bursting with the kinds of problems that inspired Brown's 2011 prison reforms. A law he backed that year steered to county jails a class of inmates who used to be assigned to state-run prisons. Since then, the number of inmate assaults on jail staff almost doubled, according to the Public Policy Institute of California. The number of jail inmate deaths climbed, too, and remains persistently high since Brown's so-called prison realignment, according to the state Department of Justice.

Elected sheriffs like Merced County's Vern Warnke fault Brown's prison law for the violence in their jails. He and others say they don't have the staff, money or training to safely handle the new kind of inmates.

"Our staffing levels are low, and don't think for a minute those inmates don't know it," Warnke told McClatchy's Merced Sun-Star after a death in 2017. "We're very sorry an inmate had to die."

News outlets, including McClatchy's five California properties, have covered the jail deaths in single stories and one-off enterprise pieces on the most galling cases. The San Luis Obispo Tribune, for instance, edited 100 hours of surveillance video to show just when Andrew Holland died and what deputies did following. They laughed, in his cell, as first responders tried to revive Holland.

We have not yet helped people in California understand the bigger picture across the state. With a grant from ProPublica, we would request public records for every jail death in the state over the last 10 years. We'll develop narratives, pinpoint troublesome counties, identify commonalities and delineate potential causes. The work would unfold in a series of text stories and videos. We'll create searchable tools that would allow readers to learn about victims. We'll also quantify the hit to the taxpayer by tallying up claims for damages and lawsuit payouts. Importantly, we'll get to the bottom of whether California local governments are equipped to handle the violence and mental illness they meet routinely in jails and to answer the question of whether Brown's policies exacerbated the stress on those correctional facilities.

The project would be led Sacramento Bee senior writer Adam Ashton in partnership with ProPublica, McClatchy California visual journalists, developers and reporters at The Bee's sister newspapers.

The Sacramento Bee has the ear of legislators statewide given its presence in the capital, where a team of seven reporters and editors covers state government and employees. The

Commented [1]: Here you see the reporters clearly stating what the problem is and then who/what is accountable for the problem. Doing this is key to a sound proposal. This helps us envision the potential of the project.

Commented [2]: Right here the proposal cites existing reporting and notes the lack of deeper dives. It's important that we know how your proposal differs from previous coverage of the issue. This also tells us that you've done some research and you know what unique reporting avenues exist.

Commented [3]: States clear reporting goals. Has ideas on how to do it and what shape the reporting can take.

reporting would ask whether California state government, with a booming economy and a \$16 billion general fund surplus, is providing sufficient mental health and security resources to the local jails that cushioned Brown's prison reforms.

Why us

State statistics tracking deaths in county jails show that McClatchy's home markets are among the worst offenders. Surprisingly, tony San Luis Obispo County has 9.1 deaths per million inmate days over the last five years (the statewide average is 4.7 per 1 million inmate days). Others in McClatchy's California network are not far off: Tehama, Shasta and Stanislaus are all in our coverage areas. Fresno County, where advocates say the county jail resembles a dungeon, also has a death rate above the statewide average.

Our collaborative approach would enable the work to be published across five communities – Sacramento, Modesto, Merced, Fresno and San Luis Obispo – without fail. As important, it would enable a lead editor to work with reporters across the region on the project and they would learn from each other. We also have a content-sharing agreement with the Bay Area News Group and the Los Angeles News Group.

LRN Project: <https://www.propublica.org/series/overcorrection>

Commented [4]: Opportunities this proposal presented for engagement reporting-

Callout: What Do You Know About County Jails in California? Talk to Us.

"We're looking for people who have spent time in county jails across California. We're also seeking the impressions of family members and others who know someone who's been incarcerated."

Letter writing campaign and event:

"ProPublica and The Sacramento Bee want to reach more inmates with our stories. You can help. Join us at the Oakland Main Library on Aug. 5.

Commented [5]: Signals potential for impact.

Commented [6]: Providing some idea as to why you or your outlet is particularly well suited to tackle the issues you're proposing can strengthen your proposal. They do a good job of that here.